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The Power of Populism

Geert Wilders and the Party for
Freedom in the Netherlands

Koen Vossen



The Power of Populism

This book discusses the Party for Freedom (PVV), a political party in the Netherlands, founded and led by Geert Wilders. Attaining between 10 and 18% of the votes, the PVV has become one of the largest parties in the Netherlands and is the only political party worldwide without members. Between 2010 and 2012 the party supported a minority coalition of liberals and Christian Democrats in exchange for influence on governmental policy. The PVV can be viewed as the Dutch version of an ideological family of nationalist parties linked by their opposition to immigration and to the political and cultural elites. Within this family, Geert Wilders has played an important role as pioneer of a new master frame, in which Islam is portrayed as the historical arch-enemy of the West. As the main figurehead of European Islamophobia, Wilders has inspired political parties and organisations in Europe, North America, Israel and even Australia.

Examining data collected on various aspects of the party (for example, voters, activists, organisation and ideology) and employing theoretical insights from sociology, electoral geography and political science, this book analyses this controversial phenomenon and seeks to obtain a clearer picture of the functioning of the PVV. This book will be of interest to students and scholars interested in European politics and current affairs more generally.

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Preface

It was a rainy Friday evening in August when I first saw Geert Wilders speak in person. In a small conference room at the back of the otherwise deserted Ahoy Complex in Rotterdam, his Party for Freedom (Partij Voor de Vrijheid, PVV) proudly presented its list of candidates for the upcoming House of Representatives election on 12 September 2012. His tall figure and bottle-blond Mozart hairstyle placed Wilders firmly at the centre of attention.

‘September 12th will be Liberation Day’, Wilders declared, at which his following clapped their hands and waved little Dutch flags with abandon. How many of them were there? Two hundred, two hundred and fifty at most? Once some technical hitches were ironed out, the party screened a specially commissioned election film which showed the European Union and Islam to be at the root of all the country’s problems. Afterwards, some of the party leader’s young assistants handed out election posters. Would we please put them up somewhere?

A casual observer might easily have taken this for the election meeting of some marginal newcomer party. I recognised the atmosphere, having attended similar meetings before – and read about many more – as part of my doctoral research into minor political parties in the Netherlands. The blend of wishful thinking, naïve amateurism, blinkered sectarianism and a pioneering spirit fascinated me. What made people cling to a dream that was so patently an illusion?

Gathered at Ahoy Rotterdam was not some ineffectual party supported by a handful of voters, however, but the third largest political party in the Netherlands; a party with 24 seats in the House of Representatives and the backing of 1.5 million voters. And far from being some failed would-be statesman or a charlatan with a messiah complex, their leader was the most famous Dutch politician in the world at the time. A man who had become, as a columnist put it as early as 2009, a ‘national obsession’, and whose conspicuous statements and conduct had dominated the Dutch media for over five years. Geert Wilders was the most tweeted-about person in the Netherlands, according to a specialist agency. On 21 April 2012, Wilders single-handedly toppled the minority government his party supported, by walking out of budget negotiations. This led to a general election being called and polling stations opening for almost 13 million registered voters on 12 September. Abroad, Wilders had become synonymous with the political trouble brewing in the – formerly so tranquil – Netherlands

since the turn of the century. The Economist considered Wilders, together with Nigel Farage and Marine Le Pen, representatives of the European Tea Party. Especially in the two years in which Wilders and the PVV kept the minority government in power, Dutch diplomats had to work overtime to limit the damage done to the Netherlands' image.

There were more indications that the PVV was not a 'normal' party that evening. Before being admitted to the meeting, attendees were subjected to a range of safety measures that would not have been out of place in a departure terminal for transatlantic flights. Various personal details had to be submitted to the organisation for screening, far in advance. The visitors formed a long queue in the Ahoy foyer, under the grim stare of security agents who scrupulously checked each visitor's name against a list before letting them proceed to the metal detector gates and frisking sessions. Inside, I was ushered to the crowded journalists' section, packed with Dutch, Flemish, German, English and Spanish journalists. Wilders came over to the journalists immediately after his speech, patiently answering all their questions.

What kind of strange party would do things this way? What was the meaning of this bewildering blend of political amateurism, stringent safety measures and high media coverage? How could I find words for this seemingly new phenomenon?

In recent years, finding the right words to describe Wilders and his party has become a popular Dutch pastime in the media, in politics, on web forums and in pubs. Is he a hatemonger or a whistleblower, a racist or a realist, the people's advocate or a con man? Is he the voice of the marginalised, or a power-hungry opportunist? Does he create problems or expose them? Is he an authoritarian despot or a decisive, dyed-in-the-wool democrat? Does he protect Dutch culture or tarnish the country's image? Is Wilders a brave new freedom fighter in the war against Islamic fascism, or does his party actually represent a new kind of fascism?

Questions like this have been hanging over the Dutch polder landscape like a dark cloud for at least six years. Even outside their own country, Dutch people are often asked who on earth that man with the funny hair is who so frequently makes the news. In the Netherlands, the terms people use to talk about Wilders often serve as a kind of litmus test, a way of gauging where they stand politically and whether or not they are fit to be associated with. A negative opinion of the PVV can mark you out as a civilised kindred spirit to some and an arrogant pinko leftist to others. Wilders seems to have split the Netherlands into two camps. Such a highly polarised debate leaves little room for nuance; any attempt at an objective view of the party is often interpreted as too positive – in which case you are seen as a secret sympathiser – or else too negative, making you a politically correct pseudo-academic.

An important aim of this book was to study the party with detachment and dedication. Difficult though it was, I have attempted to present the PVV as a historical phenomenon, something from another age that needs to be explained to people today. To that end, I have made use of insights and theories from sociology, electoral geography and political science, as well as 'erklärendes

Verstehen' (explanatory understanding), a method widely used in historical research to explain opinions and behaviours by exploring them from the inside. I have thus endeavoured to sketch a portrait of the PVV in all its different guises. Why did Wilders found the PVV? What are the party's ideas and how does it try to put them into practice? What has it contributed to the various parliaments in which it has been represented? What is its organisational structure? How many active members does it have? And finally, who are its supporters and why do they vote PVV?

The book reads like a journey from the centre to the periphery, starting in the first chapters with a description of Geert Wilders' political formation against a background of rapid change taking place in the Netherlands. From the party's founder and undisputed leader, I go on to explore its different groups, contacts abroad, organisational structure and its voters. An image emerges of various circles that have formed around Wilders, each with a different relationship to, and expectations of, their centre. Besides close confidantes like Martin Bosma and Fleur Agema, and loyal party officials in several parliaments, there are also the silent backbenchers and candidates making up the election lists. There are the financial backers in the Netherlands and the United States, the foreign sympathisers and the volunteers putting up posters and running pro-Wilders blogs. And there are many voters – a million and a half at least – who all vote PVV with certain expectations. Finally, there are all those observing the PVV from the outside, often shaking their heads in incomprehension, who worry about the impact of the party's success on Dutch society and the country's image.

I have obtained information on the PVV through various channels. My main source was media coverage. Using the newspaper database LexisNexis, I was able to search different national and local media for reports, portraits, reconstructions, news items, and interviews with people I considered relevant. I also referred to primary sources such as Proceedings of the House of Representatives and electoral programmes published by the PVV. Naturally, I consulted the autobiographies of Geert Wilders and Martin Bosma as well as the published memoirs of former PVV parliamentarians, and made grateful use of the few scientific studies there are on the PVV and its voters. On top of that, I interviewed various people for this book (18 in total) who worked for the party at one stage but, for whatever reason, left it. For convenience's sake, I call them 'dissidents' here. While interviewing dissidents does of course raise all kinds of methodological issues – are they objective? – they were a particularly rich source of information. Four of the interviewees insisted on remaining anonymous. I would have liked to have interviewed active party members too, but all those I approached, including Wilders, Agema and Bosma, were unwilling to participate – at least, that is my conclusion from the fact that none of them has ever answered my emails. It is a fate I share with all researchers who have attempted to get in touch with the PVV so far – another distinguishing feature of the party.

Acknowledgements

The present volume is the English edition of a work that I first wrote in Dutch (*Rondom Wilders: Portret van de PVV*). In some respects, the English edition differs from the Dutch edition. First, I have added a special paragraph on the international activities of the PVV and skipped paragraphs on the PVV in provincial and local councils, which I thought were too specific for a non-Dutch audience. Second, I have incorporated information which I derived from six new interviews with insiders, who left the party after 2013. Of course, I also made use of some new publications on the PVV. Third, I have also added a description and analysis of some important new developments since 2013. Whereas in 2013 many commentators anticipated a rapid demise, the PVV seems now, in the winter of 2016, to be alive and kicking again, scoring around 25% of the vote in the polls.

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1 The making of Geert Wilders

1963–2006

There have always been political parties dominated to a large degree by their leader. Examples include Charles de Gaulle's *Rassemblement du Peuple Français*, Henry Ross Perot's Reform Party and Silvio Berlusconi's *Forza Italia*. But there is probably no other party so intrinsically linked with its leader as Geert Wilders' Party for Freedom. Not only is Wilders the founder, chairman, leading candidate and figurehead of the party, he is officially its only member. In a legal and literal sense, this makes the PVV a one-man party. It follows that any history of the PVV necessarily begins with a sketch of Geert Wilders' background and personality. Who is he? What drives him? Where did he come from? Why did he go into politics? What made him found the PVV?

Wilders' background has been the subject of thorough research through the years. There are two biographies of him, as well as various documentaries and numerous profiles in newspapers and magazines, and the PVV leader has spoken openly about his childhood, youth and inspirations in several interviews. On top of that, Wilders published two autobiographical books while still in his forties, *Kies voor Vrijheid* (Choose Freedom, 2005) and *Marked for Death* (2012).

Questions about his personality and motivations are not easy to answer at a distance without running a real risk of resorting to amateur psychology. I was, however, able to draw on various published statements and interviews given by acquaintances of Wilders to get an idea of the impression he made on his environment, and find recurring patterns. I gained an even clearer image of Wilders by incorporating specific historical and social contexts into the story.

A Catholic childhood 1963–1980

Geert Wilders was born on 6 September 1963. A late arrival, he had an older brother and two older sisters. His father held an executive position at a company that manufactured photocopiers; his mother, originally from the Dutch East Indies, was a housewife. The family lived in Venlo, a medium-sized town in the southern province of Limburg. With its own traditions, culinary culture and a dialect that is often the subject of ridicule and parody in the rest of the country, Limburg has always been something of an outlier in the Dutch nation.¹ At the time Geert Wilders was born, Limburg was, above all, a profoundly Catholic

2 *The making of Geert Wilders 1963–2006*

province. Families were large, schools and sports clubs were Catholic, and there was a chapel or crucifix on every corner. There was hardly another region in Europe whose inhabitants visited Sunday Mass so unfailingly, and which sent out so many missionaries. It was a given that a large majority of the electorate voted for the Catholic People's Party (KVP). In the 1963 general election, the KVP won a staggering 77.5% of the votes in Limburg. With 31.9% of the national vote, the KVP was again the largest party.²

Wilders' childhood in this Catholic environment was not much different from that of his contemporaries. His own memories, as well as the number of reports that have been published about his youth, sketch a portrait of a wilful, difficult boy with no remarkable talents or special interests. 'I must have driven my parents crazy', he writes in his English autobiography *Marked for Death*.³ In his teens, he turned his back on the Catholic faith his parents had instilled in him – an easy decision for Wilders, who had never been a fanatical believer. In an interview in the Dutch national newspaper, *Trouw*, Wilders said,⁴

I attended a Roman Catholic primary school and a Roman Catholic secondary school, and went to church at Christmas. That just about sums it up. I grew up surrounded by the Catholic faith, but it left no impression on me.

His apostasy from Catholicism fitted seamlessly into a general trend of secularisation in the Netherlands. Young adults with a Catholic or Protestant upbringing were leaving the Church in droves, embracing the new, progressive way of life spreading through the Netherlands. Seeing their support shrink dramatically, the KVP and Protestant parties decided to merge into the Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA) in 1980. The Netherlands was rapidly changing from the pious and unassuming country it had been in the 50s, into one of the West's most progressive nations, stunning the world with its libertarian policies on soft drugs, prostitution, homosexuality, squatting and law and order.⁵ It was also known for what the American historian Walter Laqueur derisively called 'Hollanditis', the wave of protests against the arms race and nuclear weapons.

But while he initially seemed to fit in with the predominantly left-wing subculture of those years – with his hair in long, as yet unbleached curls, his leather jacket and a taste for what he called 'left-wing anarchist bands' like the Dead Kennedys – there is no evidence Wilders ever sympathised with left-wing politics. According to statements made by himself and others, he was hardly interested in politics at all in his late teens. The question of what eventually sparked his political interest and formed his opinions is the subject of widespread speculation in the Netherlands. The most remarkable explanation is probably that provided by cultural anthropologist Lizzy van Leeuwen, who puts Geert Wilders' political orientation down to his East Indian roots and the 'identity estrangement', caused by post-colonial trauma, which is common in that ethnic group. She even claims he bleached his hair out of shame for his origins.⁶ Van Leeuwen underpins her theory chiefly with references to the conservative–nationalist attitude of many Dutch people of East Indian descent in the past and present.

However, there is little evidence that Mrs Wilders' background had any significant influence on the tastes and choices of her children, particularly as three of them would go on to develop left-wing political views. A more plausible explanation seems to lie in what Wilders himself has consistently called his 'formative experiences' in interviews over the years: visiting Israel between the ages of 18 and 19; living in the Utrecht district of Kanaleneiland; and his years working for the Health Care Insurance Board and the Social Security Supervisory Board from 1985 until 1990.

Formative experiences 1980–1990

His stay in Israel in the early 80s has also given rise to countless questions and speculations. One thing we know for certain is that after his final exam, Wilders wanted to see the world. In what was something of a rite of passage, thousands of young people in the Netherlands embarked on long, adventurous journeys abroad, the *Lonely Planet* safely stowed away in their backpacks, between leaving school and getting a job or starting at university. Wilders had initially wanted to go to Australia, but ended up in Israel because of his limited means. He worked in a bread factory for a time, stayed in a kibbutz near Jericho for six months and spent several months travelling the Middle East with a friend. Syria, like Israel, left a deep impression on him. 'Syria is full of adventure. Some places there are completely deserted. Bad roads, no street lights. In such a setting, being invited home to drink tea with twenty people is quite an experience for a hitch-hiker.'⁷ There is a well-known photograph of Wilders from this period, showing a young man with long, brown curls, a downy beard and baggy clothes, facing the camera with confidence. The Middle East first sparked his interest in political issues, which seemed so much more exciting and urgent there than in Limburg. Though he did not come from a Jewish background, he has identified strongly with the State of Israel since that trip, to the point of considering it his second home country. By his own account, he has visited Israel over 50 times since 1982, building an extensive network there.⁸

Though there are probably few other Dutch politicians with such strong ties with the country, a sense of kinship with the State of Israel was by no means uncommon in the Netherlands. Few other European countries sympathised so much with the struggle that little Israel put up against its Arab neighbouring countries in the Six Day War of 1967 and the Yom Kippur War of 1973. A popular explanation for the broad sympathy Israel enjoys in the Netherlands is that it stems from feelings of guilt about the huge number of Dutch Jews murdered in the Second World War.⁹ Around 1980, anti-fascism and pro-Israel sentiments went hand-in-hand – there was as yet little sympathy for the Palestinian cause.

What influence did Wilders' time in the Middle East have on his political thinking? Was it the seed of his aversion to Islam in later life? In his autobiography *Marked for Death*, Wilders reveals that his aversion to Islam did in fact originate in that period. As a young man, he had an important epiphany while

backpacking in Cairo, where he contracted diarrhoea by drinking water from a tap. The epiphany was not so much that some of the warnings in guidebooks are actually true – never drink tap water in developing countries – but that Islam has a destructive effect on a civilisation. Why else was Egypt, a nation that had once been so powerful, not able to provide such basic facilities as clean water? Islam had led to deterioration, apathy and inertia, resulting in an inadequate water supply system and many sick travellers, among other things.¹⁰

How plausible an explanation is this anecdote? Probably not very, though this kind of story crops up in autobiographies of political leaders remarkably often. In any case, if Wilders really gained this insight in the early 80s, he kept it to himself for a long time. No one close to him seems to have noticed a sudden change in his thinking after returning from the Middle East. It is probably more likely that being in Israel and the Middle East at that stage of his life opened his eyes in a more general sense, to a world outside Limburg; a world in which politics was often a matter of life and death.

After returning to the Netherlands, Wilders completed his military service and moved to Utrecht, the fourth largest city in the Netherlands and a popular university town. By his own account, living in Utrecht provided Wilders with another important experience that formed his political vision. He witnessed the metamorphosis of the Kanaleneiland district, where he moved into a flat in 1985, from a respectable, white middle-class neighbourhood into, in his words, a small Casablanca or Istanbul ‘with the streets full of Arabic or Turkish shop signs and women wearing headscarves’. Non-Muslims were intimidated, mugged and harassed into leaving. ‘I have been robbed. On several occasions I had to run for safety’, Wilders said in a 2013 speech in Australia.¹¹

It is true that the Utrecht district, with its many poorly educated immigrants, high unemployment and rampant crime, has been considered a problem neighbourhood for years. In September 2007, a temporary ban on meetings was introduced in an effort to prevent gangs of young Moroccans from causing trouble. Even so, the memory seems a flimsy premise; Wilders’ brother, who also lived in Utrecht at the time, does not remember him complaining about immigrants in particular. Nor was there any sign yet of a pronounced dislike of Islam, as he and a number of other sources testify.¹²

In Kanaleneiland, Wilders did witness the impact of a huge influx of non-Western immigrants at first hand. Many Dutch cities in the 80s and 90s saw the emergence of so-called ‘black districts’, i.e. neighbourhoods with a high concentration of non-Western immigrants. Many of them hailed from Morocco or Turkey, where Dutch companies had actively recruited employees in the 60s and 70s. There were also large groups of refugees from Islamic countries such as Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan and Somalia who were granted asylum in the 90s, as well as immigrants coming to the Netherlands from colonies and former colonies such as Indonesia, Surinam and the Netherlands Antilles. While the Netherlands counted 200,000 non-Western immigrants in 1970 (1.5% of the population), that number had reached 1.6 million (9.7% of the population) by the year 2000. With almost a million adherents, Islam had become the second largest religion in the

country. The change in the Randstad, the urban conglomeration in the West of the Netherlands, was particularly striking; its population had gone from milk-white to a multi-ethnic society in one generation. Unfortunately, this coincided with a period in which many industries went out of business, reducing the demand for unskilled labour. Large numbers of immigrants with insufficient qualifications and command of the language ended up on welfare, losing touch with the labour market, and in many cases also with Dutch society. In 2002, unemployment among Turks, Moroccans, Surinamese and Antilleans was three times as high as among the indigenous population. A subclass of unskilled and often poorly integrated foreigners had started developing in the 80s, concentrated in tower block districts on the outskirts of the large cities.¹³

A final formative experience Wilders has often mentioned in interviews is working for the government organisation that supervises the running of the Netherlands' convoluted social security system. He quickly managed to absorb the complex matter of social security law, an achievement in itself given the difficulty of the subject. After his epic, exciting adventures in the Middle East, he was now faced with the slow-paced and somewhat boring Dutch culture of compromise. In the extensive and bureaucratic corporate Dutch administrative machine, reaching consensus and gaining public support were seen as the highest aims, even at the cost of efficiency and justice. In early interviews and in his first autobiography *Kies voor Vrijheid* (Choose Freedom, published in 2005), Wilders underlines the strong aversion to the sluggishness and bureaucracy of the Dutch welfare state that working at those two government organisations instilled in him. He discovered that employers and trade unions used the Disability Insurance Act (WAO) as an easy way of getting rid of superfluous employees. Dutch employees were declared unable to work on the flimsiest medical grounds, because for both employee and employer, this was more advantageous than dismissal. When he flagged up the abuse, however, his predominantly left-wing colleagues tended to draw a veil over it. As he writes in *Kies voor Vrijheid*, 'The public interest was sacrificed to the interest of certain groups'.¹⁴

In contrast to his stay in the Middle East and living in Kanaleneiland, his stint as a legal adviser did have immediate political consequences. First, it acted as an important incentive to join the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD) in 1988, the third largest party at the time and coalition partner of the CDA. For a right-wing young atheist, the conservative-liberal VVD was an obvious choice, and thanks to the considerable knowledge he had acquired of the Dutch social security system, a golden opportunity fell into his lap. By a whim of fate, the parliamentary group of the VVD was looking for a social security policy adviser in 1990. Wilders decided to apply for the position and impressed his interviewers with his extensive and detailed knowledge of a complex subject that few liberals knew much about. It was ample compensation for his lack of an academic degree or a past as an active member of either the VVD or its youth division, the JOVD.

And so his political life began with a paid job in the House of Representatives, though there was as yet little to suggest that a great political future awaited

him. Unlike many of his later political rivals, the 26-year-old Wilders had not completed any graduate degrees, nor did his curriculum vitae boast a string of advisory activities. Wilders was a boy from the province, a ‘practical man’ in his mid-twenties, who was given the unique opportunity to prove himself in an environment where there was power and status to be earned. He was to seize the opportunity with both hands. From that moment on, politics became his vocation and Parliament his natural habitat.

In Dutch politics 1990–2000

Political life in the Netherlands takes place in The Hague, or more precisely, in and around the Binnenhof. The complex, which dates back in part to the seventeenth century, houses parliamentary as well as government buildings, and most Dutch ministries are located around the Binnenhof. The Netherlands has had a bicameral system since 1814. Of the two chambers of Parliament, the second chamber (House of Representatives) has the more power. Its 150 members are chosen by a system of proportional representation.¹⁵ In the 1989 House of Representatives elections, the CDA and the social democrat Labour Party (PvdA) won 35.3% and 31.9% of the vote respectively. As usual, the VVD, the party Wilders had joined, trailed slightly behind with 14.5% of the vote. The low electoral threshold allowed for a series of smaller parties in the House of Representatives, such as the left-wing liberal Democrats ’66 (D66), GreenLeft, a number of orthodox Protestant parties and the Centre Democrats (CD), a one-man party fiercely opposed to immigration. The CD, which had only just exceeded the electoral threshold with 0.7% of the vote, was generally considered a pseudo-fascist party and existed in complete isolation.

Generally speaking, politics in the Netherlands was neither a very spectacular nor exciting affair, and Dutch politicians tended to be capable and modest. Compared to many other countries, there was little corruption and clientelism, and people generally trusted their government – though there was also dissatisfaction, especially in intellectual circles, about the lack of profile and roots of many politicians, especially since they did not win their Parliamentary seats by being elected in a district but due to their place on the party’s list of candidates.

This environment allowed Wilders to work his way up – without having to mount a campaign – from a job on the party staff to full member of the VVD parliamentary group. In the space of a few years, he went from being a rather insignificant office clerk to a fully fledged, professional politician; a Hague insider. According to former colleagues, Wilders was practically always holed up in his tiny, confined Binnenhof room in those years, working as if he was possessed: devouring files and parliamentary papers, writing speeches and parliamentary questions, organising working visits and educational trips, making appointments with various interested people and reading books and articles on a wide range of subjects. Weekends and recesses did not exist to him; Wilders was always at work. The time he did take off, he invested in placements or working visits to foreign organisations that were active in the Middle East and Israel – still his great passion

in those years. Hungary and Central Europe also interested him, which was doubtless linked to his marriage in 1992 to the Hungarian, Krisztina Marfai.¹⁶

Otherwise, his social network consisted mainly of fellow party members, who, in the many portraits of Wilders that have been published, speak of his friendly manner, but also call him a perfectionist and a loner who no one really understood. He avoided party gatherings and contact with grassroots members as much as possible. To become a member of the House of Representatives he was required to raise his profile in his native Venlo, but was too much of a Hague politician to become a true local representative. 'He would turn up whenever there was a meeting of the local branch on a Saturday morning', a former party member from Limburg recalls, 'but as for staying on for an hour or so to chat with the members – forget it. He preferred going home to his computer, to read a report on some Catholic minority in Syria or something.'¹⁷

Politically speaking, Wilders had cast his lot with VVD leader, Frits Bolkestein. Bolkestein, who would go on to become an EU commissioner, won the VVD leadership in 1990, at a time when the liberals' popularity was at a low point. In the preceding years, the VVD had almost exclusively followed the lead of its coalition partner, the CDA. When the CDA of Prime Minister Ruud Lubbers decided to form a coalition with Wim Kok's PvdA in 1989, the VVD did not have a political agenda to speak of. Bolkestein would go on to develop the VVD's political agenda in the years to come. Bolkestein's political-ideological views were a mixture of neoliberal economic ideas, foreign policy realism and socio-cultural conservatism. His economic neoliberalism manifested itself in his preference for small government, fewer corporatist institutions and less negotiation with unions. His foreign policy realism was heavily tinted by his general scepticism towards lofty ideals and exaggerated ambition, a lesson he learnt from the Second World War. Unsurprisingly, he was critical of the advancing European integration and the extension of NATO, because they were happening too fast with too optimistic a view of their outcome. His socio-cultural conservatism came to the fore in his repeated call for reinstating community values supplanted by the progressive spirit of the 60s. He viewed these community values, which included a civilised nationalism, greater awareness of history, classical notions about high and low culture, a preference for traditional educational systems and an emphasis on the moral and intellectual leadership of the political and cultural elite, as the moral foundations of society.¹⁸

But Bolkestein was undoubtedly most notorious for being one of the first politicians to denounce the multiculturalism of Dutch minority policy. He argued that the political elite let itself be guided by a principle he described as 'cultural relativism', an idea that had become prevalent since the 60s which states that all cultures are fundamentally equal. According to Bolkestein, minority policies should be based on the assumption of the superiority of Western values and culture; newcomers from other cultures should eventually assimilate into the dominant Western *Leitkultur*. Bolkestein was referring to Islamic culture in particular – an ever more conspicuous presence in Dutch streets, especially those of large cities, since the 90s – which he said increasingly caused feelings of insecurity and uneasiness in the native population.

On the political stage, Bolkestein stood out for his aggressive debating style, untypical by Dutch standards, in that he was aiming for conflict rather than compromise. In concise sentences delivered with an almost brusque conviction, he forced his opponents onto the defensive. He also enjoyed drawing attention to taboos, before making a show of breaking them, in sometimes rambling essays and interviews on subjects ranging from the education system to the effectiveness of development aid, from European integration to the lack of remorse shown by many former communists, and from the necessity of nationalism to the failure of cultural relativism. In an analysis of the debate on multicultural society, the philosopher Baukje Prins aptly described Bolkestein's debating style as 'new realism', a genre that according to her is typified by its author presenting himself as someone with the courage to face painful facts the population at large has always been aware of, but which the predominantly left-wing elite denies out of political correctness.¹⁹

The press was soon captivated by this politician, so fascinating and unfathomable by Dutch standards, who was always good for an interesting quote. His opponents found refuting his arguments by no means a simple task – too much criticism could easily be construed as an attempt to nip the debate in the bud and carry on denying the truth. Moreover, various polls showed that a growing proportion of the population was increasingly worried about immigration and integration and considered them important political subjects. It follows that Bolkestein's statements on immigration, integration and Islam were a key reason, albeit not the only one, for the VVD's electoral success at the House of Representatives elections of 1994 and provincial elections of 1995; after the latter, it was even the largest party for the first time in its history.

A remarkable result, given it was also the first time the VVD had cooperated with its former sworn enemy, the PvdA, in the so-called 'Purple Coalition', which included the left-wing liberal D66 party and was formed in 1994 after the CDA's crushing defeat at the House of Representatives elections of the same year. For the first time since 1918, a coalition government was formed without the Christian Democrats. The purple coalition, led by the Social Democrat Wim Kok, turned out to be an unexpected success, helped among other things by the economic boom that gave it the financial means to soothe quite a few potential tensions. After their strong election victories in the House of Representatives elections of 1998, both parties stayed in the purple coalition.

The VVD won so many seats at that election that even the member lowest on the party list, Geert Wilders in forty-sixth place, gained a seat in the House of Representatives. In August 1998, exactly eight years after starting work for the party, he was sworn in as one of its 150 members. He soon attracted attention to himself, following Bolkestein's example, by denouncing the 'lethargic culture of compromise' and the 'progressive nonsense'. He stated boldly in an interview that,

When something isn't right, you need to have the courage to point it out. The lethargic culture of compromise in this country means it often takes a

decade until a good idea or workable plan is realised. I dare to stick my neck out and broach subjects that are actually relevant to people. Politics takes courage.²⁰

In those years, Wilders showed such ‘courage’ chiefly during debates about abuse of social security and the reform of the welfare state. To the horror of D66 and the PvdA, he unearthed a number of alarming facts about large-scale abuse of the Sickness Benefits Act, and argued that lenient regulations with regard to mental disability in particular were a widely-used means for getting rid of difficult or superfluous employees. In no other European country were there so many employees on sickness benefit. With his gift for striking one-liners, Wilders called the Netherlands, ‘Europe’s village idiot’, the Disability Insurance Act a ‘rudderless supertanker irrevocably heading for a sand bank’ and the House of Representatives a ‘Socialist social security fest’.²¹ He would have liked to see the minimum wage scrapped and social services made available only to the most destitute. Increasingly, he accompanied his suggestions for drastic reform of the welfare state with a general attack on the Dutch consensus-based ‘polder model’ of government, which in his view was too centralised and in which trade unions wielded too much power despite being hardly representative anymore. In a controversial article published in the progressive Dutch daily newspaper *De Volkskrant*, titled ‘Curb the Unions’ Power’, he argued that ‘everything is discussed to death in this country’.²² ‘The excessive pursuit of social consensus sucks the dynamics out of socio-economic activities, which is something the Netherlands can no longer afford.’ Wilders envisaged a leaner, less centralised government, guided by the needs of the individual citizen (‘made-to-measure’) instead of the largely unrepresentative social organisations. The Netherlands needed a neoliberal revolution such as Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher had unleashed in the United States and the United Kingdom respectively.

Wilders emulated his role model, Bolkestein, in another respect: while his bark was loud, he never actually bit. At the end of the day, both Wilders and Bolkestein always adhered to the coalition agreement entered into with the PvdA and D66. In his role as a VVD parliamentarian, Wilders gave his blessing to various proposals he would later condemn, such as the introduction of the euro, the expansion of the European Union with Eastern European countries, the launch of negotiations with Turkey about joining the EU, and countless others he was to dismiss as multicultural nonsense. Working for the party, he even helped draw up a private member’s bill for equal opportunities for foreigners on the labour market. There was as yet little sign of the criticism he would later voice on subjects like European integration, fighting crime, and the government’s environmental and minority policies.

So did Wilders’ later aversion to immigration and Islam come completely out of the blue? Not quite, though in those years, he focused his attention on Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism in the Middle East. His many travels in the region, his close ties with the Israeli embassy and countless conversations with experts about the situation in the Middle East provided him with an in-depth knowledge

of emerging Islamic extremism. In the 90s, this political Islam manifested itself in various places, such as Algeria, where a bloody civil war was raging between Islamists and the secular regime; Afghanistan, after the Taliban seized power; Israel, where Hamas perpetrated terrorist attacks; and of course Iran, which had been an Islamic republic since 1979. His preoccupation with the subject became clear when, in December 1999 and over a year after being sworn in as a member of the House of Representatives, he handed in a bulky report on the dangers of Muslim extremism and weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East. In preparation for the report, he had held extensive conversations with people from counterterrorist organisations and many experts including Donald Rumsfeld, who would later become the US Secretary of Defence. Asked by a journalist whether the subject was not too remote for Dutch citizens, Wilders countered,

On the contrary – extremism in those countries is threatening the stability of Europe and the Netherlands. It is set to become the greatest problem of the coming decade, as migration will bring extremism to the Netherlands. It is happening already, though no one seems to talk about it.²³

But neither the House of Representatives nor the press had much interest in Muslim extremism in December 1999. The country was engrossed in the soaring stock market and Máxima Zorreguieta, Crown Prince Willem Alexander's new girlfriend. 'It is almost frightening how cheerfully the Netherlands is ringing in the next thousand years', a journalist wrote shortly before the turn of the millennium.²⁴ According to the polls, the Prime Minister Wim Kok's second purple cabinet did seem to rule the country to the complete satisfaction of a large majority of the population. The gross domestic product had again risen by 4% in 1999, unemployment was at a historically low level, the budget was balanced and the far-right Centre Democrats had all but vanished from the stage since their election defeat in 1998. Wim Kok enjoyed international esteem as one of the founders of the Third Way, the reconciliation of social democracy and economic liberalism. 'You were first, Wim!' Bill Clinton complimented the Dutch prime minister during a meeting of Third Way leaders in 1999.²⁵ The only dissenting voice was that of the Socialist Party (SP). Founded in 1972, the SP had only gained a parliamentary seat in 1994 after the Maoist sect had reinvented itself as a populist, left-wing protest party. They opposed the purple coalition's 'neoliberalism' and 'free-market fundamentalism', as well as the growing chasm between the ordinary people and the professional technocratic politicians in The Hague. In the House of Representatives and during interviews, its leader Jan Marijnissen presented himself as an authentic spokesman for these 'ordinary people', whom he felt were being left in the lurch by politics in general and the PvdA in particular.²⁶ The party put itself squarely on the map with a sophisticated publicity campaign, extra-parliamentary activism and very active and fierce opposition in the House of Representatives, gradually increasing its support to 3.5% in 1998, while other opposition parties – the CDA, GreenLeft – were taking a far more cautious approach. Hoping one day to become a governing

party, possibly with the purple parties, they only delivered constructive criticism couched in mild terms. As a result, the Binnenhof of the year 2000 was smothered under a blanket of dullness and predictability. Who would be able to shake things up?

Not Geert Wilders, in any case. His strong but carefully dosed comments on the welfare state and his eccentric hairstyle may have made him stand out a little more than the average backbencher, and those in the know probably recognised his political talent, but he was completely unknown to the public at large. At the beginning of the new millennium, he seemed destined for a good position as a mayor, junior minister or high-ranking bureaucrat. No one then would have predicted that Wilders would be an MP five years later, under constant police protection and frantically trying to get his own political party off the ground. By that time, the optimism of the year 2000 had all but evaporated. According to many commentators, the Dutch were no longer cheerful, but ‘angry’ and ‘confused’, fearfully hiding behind their dykes.²⁷ What had gone wrong in the Netherlands?

A tale of two murders

The beginning of the unrest can be dated fairly accurately to 11 September 2001, the day the terrorist organisation Al Qaeda carried out a series of attacks in the United States, claiming thousands of lives. In one blow, the period of peace, harmony and prosperity that had begun with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 seemed to come to an end. The 9/11 attacks caused an acute feeling of threat and insecurity worldwide. President George W. Bush called for a war on what he dubbed the ‘Axis of Evil’, a group of rogue states including Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran and North Korea who were threatening the West. Many in the Netherlands feared a new world war, or at least fresh terrorist attacks at home. Opinion polls were published that showed that many Muslims living in the Netherlands sympathised with the attacks to some extent, while half of the Dutch population stated that the attacks had negatively affected their personal opinions of Islam and Muslims.²⁸ This placed Islam, now the country’s third largest religious denomination, at the centre of attention.

One of Islam’s fiercest critics was Pim Fortuyn, a former sociology professor who had made a name for himself as a columnist and the author of several books. A month after the attacks, Fortuyn said in an interview that a ‘cold war against Islam’ was needed, which he called a ‘backward, agrarian desert ideology’ that clashed with Western values. Just like Frits Bolkestein and his pupil Geert Wilders, Fortuyn wanted nothing to do with the ‘cultural relativism’ of the progressive parties (which he called ‘the Left Church’) and called for a fundamental reform of the welfare state. Though he aspired to a political career, Fortuyn was not admitted to the VVD or any other party; his high-pitched, shrill voice, foppish appearance, often blunt columns and flamboyantly expressed homosexuality seemed to doom Fortuyn to an existence as a mediagenic outsider. When Bolkestein announced that he was happy to continue cooperating

with the PvdA, Fortuyn decided to enter the political stage independently of the established parties – unlike many others in the Netherlands, he found the continuation of the purple coalition a ‘chilling prospect’. He believed it had made Dutch politics a stultifying, technocratic affair, while the Netherlands actually yearned for a government with vision, élan and leadership. Even before securing the formal backing of a party, he immediately announced he was running for the highest post. In an interview in *Elsevier* he emphasised,

My ambition to become prime minister is not a joke. I would never joke about that. It is not a fantasy. Every human being needs a purpose, and since my childhood, my purpose has been to rule the country. Don’t ask me how, but I feel it is going to happen.²⁹

Fortuyn was initially roped in to become the political leader of Liveable Netherlands (LN). This new political movement, a conflation of a number of local parties, wanted to lead the attack on the established parties. To that end, they employed an American-trained spin doctor and media expert, whose first advice was to appoint a well-known and charismatic leader. Though Fortuyn seemed the perfect candidate at first, he soon clashed with the party leaders over some of the strong statements he made about Islam and integration. In February 2002, he left LN to found his own party with a couple of business friends of his, and called it after himself, the ‘Pim Fortuyn List’ (LPF). As the general elections were to be held in May 2002, Fortuyn had very little time to put together a list of candidates, raise funds for the campaign and write an election programme. The latter proved to be the easiest part, thanks to his ten years’ experience shining his light on a whole range of subjects as a columnist. The resulting programme turned out to be an elaboration on Fortuyn’s analysis of the Dutch consensus economy, whose bureaucratic structure and entrenched agreements he claimed were out of touch with the age of globalisation and the Internet – only a drastic reform of the public sector and liberalisation of the consensus economy could bring the Netherlands into the twenty-first century. According to Fortuyn, this had not happened yet because it was not in the interest of the Dutch elite, the party members who passed each other all the plum jobs created by bureaucracy and the many management tiers.³⁰

Fortuyn had another reason for thinking that the Netherlands needed a change of politics. He endorsed Samuel Huntington’s vision of a future in which different civilisations would clash with each other and the strongest and most vigorous would eventually win. This meant it was the role of politics to not only cherish and nurture its culture, but to protect it from decadence and nihilism. Fortuyn argued that Dutch culture and identity had been sidelined, leaving much of the Dutch population feeling ‘orphaned’. Consequently, it was essential for a new political elite to actively strengthen the Dutch identity and propagate Dutch standards and values, which according to him included such progressive achievements as the emancipation of women and homosexuals that immigrants from other cultures, such as Islam, had to accept. ‘I don’t feel like doing the emancipation of

women and homosexuals all over again', Fortuyn declared repeatedly. In his view, a restrictive immigration policy was necessary because all the energy was needed for the assimilation of already-present immigrants into Dutch culture.³¹

Neither the media nor the other parties knew what to make of Fortuyn's candidacy, or his barely organised little party. Due to the voting system and low electoral threshold, political fortune-hunters and small protest parties had always been part of Dutch electoral folklore, but Fortuyn appeared to be of a different calibre. He dominated the election debates, partly because of his liberal and social democrat rivals' weak opposition, and the ratings soared whenever he appeared on television. Attempts by his opponents to dismiss him as a far-right extremist backfired when Fortuyn accused them of trying to 'demonise' him, and even stated that they would be responsible if anyone attempted to harm him.

His words turned out to be prophetic when, on 6 May 2002, Fortuyn was shot dead in the Hilversum Media Park by a 33-year-old animal rights activist who believed he was acting in the interest of vulnerable members of society. The murder sparked strong reactions throughout the country. In Rotterdam, thousands of people left flowers outside Fortuyn's house, while in The Hague, an angry mob marching to the Binnenhof had to be restrained by riot police. 'The bullet came from the left', a close colleague of Fortuyn's said, and many agreed with him. His followers declared on television and in the papers that Pim had been someone who had finally 'dared to say what so many thought', and had paid for it with his life. His funeral escalated into an almost pseudo religious display of affection and public emotion that reminded British journalists of the funeral of Princess Diana.³²

Despite the commotion, the House of Representatives elections of 15 May 2002 took place as planned, though the campaign was discontinued. Pim Fortuyn won almost 1.5 million votes – 17% – posthumously. With 26 seats in parliament, the LPF shot up to being the second largest party in the country. The emotions of the preceding days did not even seem to have distorted the result: on the day of the murder, the polls had predicted the same outcome. What did come as a surprise, was the CDA ending up as the largest party; after a leadership crisis, the Christian Democrats had put forward the completely unknown and not very prepossessing Jan Peter Balkenende as a candidate. Many voters who did not want to vote purple saw Balkenende as the alternative to Fortuyn. The purple parties were hit particularly hard, the PvdA losing almost half and the VVD over a third of their voters.

As a result of the election, Jan Peter Balkenende was to form a coalition, and the inexperienced Christian Democrat found willing coalition partners in both the LPF and the VVD. In concession to the LPF, the new government presented a whole new set of proposals on asylum law, integration and immigration – they did not come to anything, however, as the LPF soon proved unequal to the responsibility. Not altogether surprising, given the chaos and anarchy that had broken out in the LPF after Fortuyn's murder: in the absence of a leader and a shared past, the LPF soon descended into internal squabbles, culminating in a flaming row between two of the party's ministers. On 16 October 2002, after only 86 days, the cabinet collapsed and fresh elections were called.

Superficially, the result of these elections in January 2003 looked like a shift to normality. The LPF lost two-thirds of its following and would face even greater losses in the years that followed. Under its young new leader, Wouter Bos, the PvdA regained much of its lost ground, winning 27% of the vote. The VVD, too, recovered a little, though less than it had hoped. The CDA was still the largest party, and Jan Peter Balkenende continued as prime minister. This time, Balkenende formed a coalition with the liberal right-wing VVD and left-wing D66, bringing two of the three purple parties back to the centre of power.

With the CDA, PvdA and VVD once again the largest parties and the smaller D66 facing an uncertain future, the old order seemed to be restored. Nevertheless, the whole episode – often called ‘the long year of 2002’ in the Netherlands – caused major repercussions in a variety of fields. For one thing, it showed more clearly than ever that a large part of the Dutch electorate felt alienated by the established parties. Each vote was a struggle, and new parties were now in with a chance. Fortuyn also proved that it was possible to get voters on board without much in the way of party organisation – ready access to the media and regular airplay turned out to be of at least as much value. What was more, the Dutch media had become more willing than ever to offer political newcomers a platform since Fortuyn’s arrival. Not only did eccentric and opinionated outsiders like Fortuyn boost viewing figures, journalists were also afraid of missing out on certain political and social trends. After the events of 2002, they swarmed out to get the opinion of the ‘man in the street’, and subjects like integration, immigration and Islam shot up the political agenda thereafter. A widely held view was that Dutch integration policy had failed because criticism of immigrants was a taboo subject. Previously seen as a time of prosperity and contentment, in hindsight the 90s came to be viewed as a period of political correctness and evasion of the real issues.³³ The question whether freedom of speech was more important than the right of freedom from discrimination and insult would become a hot topic, while Fortuyn’s murder had given the debate on these subjects a whole new dimension. The Netherlands, too, had to learn to live with the possibility of political violence.

The impact of Fortuyn’s murder was compounded by a second murder of another extremely outspoken Dutch celebrity, the filmmaker Theo van Gogh on 2 November 2004. Van Gogh was better known in the Netherlands for his provocative remarks and black humour than his films. He called Muslims ‘goat fuckers’ and Jesus ‘that rotting fish of Nazareth’, and he ridiculed the Holocaust by joking that ‘cremated Jewish diabetics smelled of toffee’. Ian Buruma accurately characterised him as someone who, out of a typically Dutch type of offensive libertarianism, pushed the boundaries of freedom of speech and progressive decency in the conviction that ‘words normally were without consequences’.³⁴

The murderer was a young Islamic fundamentalist of Moroccan descent who had grown up in Amsterdam. He left a note on Van Gogh’s body, declaring that his primary target was actually Ayaan Hirsi Ali. In August 2004, Van Gogh and Hirsi Ali had made a film together, titled *Submission*, with the aim of exposing Islam’s oppression of women. In it they projected various verses from the Koran, which appeared to justify violence against women, onto naked women’s bodies. Van Gogh

was not the only one captivated by this mediagenic and attractive Somali refugee who had renounced her Islamic faith; various well-known Dutch intellectuals worshipped Ayaan Hirsi Ali for her courage to criticise Islam and alert the Dutch to the dangers of too much naïvety. According to Hirsi Ali, Muslims who wanted to be part of Dutch society should follow her example and take a ‘shortcut to the Enlightenment’. Though she had started out as an active member of the PvdA, she switched to the VVD in late 2002, where she was immediately put forward as a candidate for the January 2003 elections. She soon caused controversy in the VVD by saying in an interview that ‘by Western standards’ the Prophet Muhammad was a ‘pervert’ and a ‘tyrant’. Her strong opinions generated a flood of hate mail which, after Fortuyn’s murder, was taken very seriously, and the security measures implemented ensured that not she, but the unprotected Van Gogh, was targeted.³⁵

A year and a half after Fortuyn’s assassination, therefore, the previously so peaceful Netherlands was again shaken up by a political murder. The weeks after the murder saw several incidents, including arson at an Islamic school. The Dutch police also arrested a group of Islamic fundamentalists who had drawn up plans for various terrorist attacks. Naturally, the two murders were linked in the public mind – Fortuyn and Van Gogh were not only both very outspoken and mediagenic personalities, they were also equally critical of Islam and the progressive consensus. After Van Gogh’s murder, the debate on freedom of speech and political correctness on the one hand and the nature and position of Islam on the other flared up as never before. Van Gogh’s friends, including various authors and columnists, led the way, assisted by a number of new blogs, such as the widely read and much-discussed *GeenStijl* (literally ‘No Class’) which openly prided itself on its ‘biased, unfounded and needlessly offensive’ content.

Comparing the impact of the two murders in the Netherlands with that of previous political murders in the United States (the Kennedys and Martin Luther King) and Sweden (Olof Palme and Anna Lindh), the American sociologist Ron Eyerman concluded that the impact on Dutch society was severe enough to cause cultural trauma, that is to say a widely shared feeling of having reached a turning point. The two murders were generally viewed as a watershed, a rift in the nation’s history and ‘a jolt to the self-image of a nation that saw itself as more sensible, better organised and less violent than others. All the taboos about political and social correctness, at least in public behaviour, seemed to vanish.’ This was replaced by an extremely dominant narrative surrounding the two murders, ‘which blames the Left for creating an atmosphere in which the violent attack on political opponents was tolerated, if not condoned’. In Eyerman’s words, the murders represented ‘an open wound, which will remain present in the collective consciousness and continue to be available for exploitation and mobilization’.³⁶

Wilders’ watershed years 2001–2004

The 38 months between 11 September 2001 and 2 November 2004 were of crucial importance to Geert Wilders’ political career. In that time, he went from being a little-known backbencher to one of the most talked-about politicians in

the Netherlands. First of all, 9/11 allowed Wilders to present himself as a wrongfully ignored whistle-blower. Had he not been one of the few people warning of the dangers of terrorism and Muslim extremism? His in-depth knowledge of Muslim extremism made him a sought-after expert on the subject, and he made many media appearances in the months after 11 September 2001. He built a reputation as a very loyal supporter of the American War on Terror and all accompanying measures, such as military interventions in Afghanistan and later Iraq. As far as he was concerned, he declared roundly, Syria, Saudi Arabia and especially Iran should also be ‘dealt with’ to eliminate the threat of Islamic terrorism. When Bush started talking about the Axis of Evil in his State of the Union speech, the excitement ‘literally’ gave him ‘goose bumps’. ‘Fantastic! Just my way of thinking!’ He believed ‘immediate, substantial action’ was needed, the VVD should ‘act decisively’ without budging ‘a millimetre’, because it was ‘the eleventh hour’ and the country needed some ‘hard-nosed realism’ to avert the new danger.

Compared to later statements, however, his views on Islam were still relatively moderate. For instance, in a popular talk show on 24 September 2001, he criticised Fortuyn’s call to a ‘cold war on Islam’. ‘I find the remark reprehensible because it lumps all Muslims together’, Wilders said. ‘There is nothing wrong with Islam, it is a respectable religion. Most Muslims in the world, and in the Netherlands, are good citizens that have done nothing wrong. The problem lies with a handful of Muslim extremists.’³⁷

Wilders was one of the few of his party to recognise early the electoral danger Fortuyn presented to the VVD. After Bolkestein had left for Brussels to become an EU Commissioner, the VVD made a major shift to the centre under the leadership of Hans Dijkstal, giving up the initiative Bolkestein had seized in debates on integration, immigration, the reform of the welfare state, European integration and the polder model. Just like Bolkestein had done a decade earlier, Fortuyn identified himself as the man who dared to break the taboos of the ‘Left Church’. It soon became clear that a large proportion of VVD voters were highly receptive to Fortuyn’s programme, and with this in mind, Wilders tried to convince Dijkstal to launch a more active, right-wing campaign à la Bolkestein, and led by example by demanding stringent measures in the media against the many Turks and Moroccans he claimed were committing benefit fraud. The conciliatory Dijkstal had no intention of changing course, however, and as Wilders had feared, the VVD paid dearly for it. No other party lost so many votes to the LPF as the VVD did: over a third of Fortuyn’s voters had supported the VVD in 1998. The many analyses conducted afterwards showed that Fortuyn’s position on immigration and integration was a decisive factor for many voters.

Fortuyn’s victory also had personal consequences for Wilders. In thirtieth place on the list of VVD candidates, he was not re-elected to the House of Representatives, and despite having twice proven his keen political instincts, he saw his political career come to an abrupt halt. Many sources confirm it was a hard blow for him. Party members close to him remember that he looked glum for weeks. ‘He has no life outside of politics. Politics is his life and his life is

politics. It was more than he knew how to handle; it left him in a black hole.’³⁸ In his memoirs, the former minister Gerrit Zalm even suspects that the trauma of his forced departure in May 2002 was the prelude to his eventually leaving the VVD in September 2004. He did not want his political fate to depend on the party’s internal squabbling about the order of the list of candidates – only the electorate should have a say in his future.³⁹ That seems far-fetched, especially considering Wilders was able to return to his beloved place in the House of Representatives after only two months. What does seem likely is that from the moment of his return to parliament, Wilders was more convinced than ever that the electoral future of the VVD lay on the right. The LPF may have had its day, but this did not mean that 1.5 million Fortuyn voters had happily returned to the established parties. Various opinion polls showed that there was a demand for a new, Fortuynesque party that called for more stringent integration and immigration policies.

In addition, Wilders started becoming ever more critical of Islam in general in 2003. An important cause of this shift was a new fellow party member who kept reiterating her view that movements like Al Qaeda were at the heart of Islam: Ayaan Hirsi Ali. Wilders was fascinated by this striking new party member, who even managed to attract international media attention, and another party member claims Hirsi Ali ‘cast a spell on Wilders’. ‘She was the catalyst that caused Wilders’ behaviour to get more and more extreme, too.’ On 12 April 2003, Hirsi Ali and Wilders published a sensational article in *NRC Handelsblad*, significantly titled ‘It is Time for a Liberal Jihad’. ‘The Islamic community inside and outside Europe is rapidly radicalising’, they warned. They believed that all kinds of extremist organisations, financed by Saudi Arabia, were poisoning the minds of Islamic youth and recruiting hundreds of Islamic fighters to carry out acts of terror. The ‘much-praised Dutch consensus model and quasi politically correct conduct’ no longer sufficed, as ‘a procrastinating and deliberating government makes a weak rather than a strong impression’. They concluded that,

[I]n order to preserve a tolerant and liberal country, we must set aside even elemental rights and laws when dealing with the people who abuse them and intend to remove them as foundation of our society. The only solution is a liberal Jihad.⁴⁰

In the months that followed, Wilders and Hirsi Ali cooperated on several articles about the struggle they considered necessary against political Islam, which they viewed as ‘a nihilist, anti-Semitic, violent religious ideology whose contempt for humanity equals that of National Socialism’. Not only did they display an increasing aversion to the wishy-washy consensus culture of Dutch politics, they also shared the neoconservative American administration’s optimism about democratising the Middle East, and believed the American invasion of Iraq deserved more support from the Netherlands. ‘Bush is a president with balls’, Wilders declared his unconditional support for the American president. ‘Bush has taken the right geopolitical decisions. It is rubbish that he has deceived the world.’⁴¹

While Hirs Ali limited herself to voicing largely abstract views on freedom and Islam, Wilders presented a whole set of concrete measures to protect the rule of law, such as deporting potential terrorists and radical imams, declaring a state of emergency and preventively arresting and detaining suspicious individuals. Drawing up these resolute proposals he made good use of his knowledge of Israel's security policies, and they gained him a lot of publicity – ever since Fortuyn, journalists had been only too keen to offer a platform to political mavericks. 'A quick visit to Wilders' office at the Binnenhof yields a torrent of blunt, not to say crass, statements', two journalists of the *De Volkskrant* noted in November 2003. Journalists elicited all kinds of statements about dubious imams ('Deport them!'), headscarves ('I can't stand them!') and left-wing politics ('Whether they call themselves social liberals, social democrats or I don't know what else, they are all socialists; birds of a feather, all with the same strange ideas').⁴²

Inside the VVD, Wilders' proposals and statements met with little support. Though Wilders presented his measures as a protection of the rule of law, he increasingly exceeded the boundaries of constitutional liberalism, whose main core values have traditionally been equality before the law, the protection of individual citizens and judicial precision. Moreover, to the horror of many of his fellow party members, Wilders increasingly started associating Islam with a wide range of problems, such as crime by young Moroccans, honour killings and the high percentage of benefits claimants and drop-outs among non-Western immigrants. He asserted that minority policy should aim at the complete assimilation of Muslims into Western society, and at the same time hinted at a temporary immigration ban for Muslims. Many Dutch politicians, including members of the VVD, completely 'lacked a sense of urgency', he declared time and again. No one within the VVD seemed to understand that the age of 'cloying harmony' and of 'singing songs, holding hands and wearing yellow bracelets' was over. This unprecedented political juncture, which he believed had emerged with the 9/11 attacks and the rise of Pim Fortuyn, called for a different programme, and a different type of politician than the 'grey mice' that manned the VVD.⁴³

When Wilders presented a ten-step plan to shift the VVD to the right in July 2004, it was the last straw for many of his fellow party members. They believed Wilders had become a publicity-crazed troublemaker who was out of control, especially since he categorically refused to agree with the VVD's viewpoint on Turkey's possible entry into the EU. An Islamic country like Turkey should never be allowed to become a member of the European Union, Wilders asserted. As far as he was concerned, the time of compromise was over; the VVD could not force him to agree to something that went against his conscience.

After several attempts at reconciliation, Wilders finally resigned from the VVD on 2 September 2004. Though he had won few preference votes and owed his seat solely to the VVD's election results in 2003, he decided to stay in the House of Representatives as an independent candidate. From there, he intended to found a new party, an unadulterated conservative voice in the progressive Netherlands.

The Wilders Group 2004–2006

In autumn 2004, Wilders' chances of successfully establishing a new party seemed slim. A large majority of new parties in the Netherlands ended in failure – even those that managed to get into the House of Representatives usually only made headlines for internal rows and misconduct. The choice of the word *conservative* did not seem auspicious, either, as the term did not have positive connotations in the Netherlands, where to most people it was almost synonymous with backwardness, small-mindedness and parochialism. This had been true even in the highly traditional, 'pillarized' Dutch society before the war, when a well-known Catholic politician remarked that a Dutchman would rather be called a thief or arsonist than a conservative.⁴⁴ Since the 60s especially, the seemingly opposite term *progressive* had become a mode of life and guiding principle to many. Whether it was on the subject of the legalisation of euthanasia, abortion or same-sex marriage, reform of the education system, European integration or the welfare state, the same progressive mantras were repeated about the Netherlands 'moving forward' and 'going with the times' – or preferably slightly ahead of them – as a 'model country'. 'A culturally progressive discourse is more deeply entrenched in the Netherlands than anywhere else', the sociologist J.W. Duyvendak concluded.⁴⁵

However, Wilders' perspective had changed radically after Theo Van Gogh's murder. As one of the best-known critics of Islam, he found himself squarely in the spotlight, which suddenly made his new movement extremely relevant despite its conservative label. The 'Wilders Group', as his party was tentatively called, soared to Fortuynesque heights in the polls. Even more importantly, Wilders, like Hirsi Ali, was forced to go into hiding for a short time after Van Gogh's murder, as his name also turned up on the Islamic fundamentalists' hit list, and the Dutch security forces were not prepared to take any risks. Two days after Van Gogh's murder, Wilders and his wife were picked up by security guards and taken to a safe address in the woods near the Belgian border. Some time later, he was moved to a prison cell at Camp Zeist, a former US Air Force Base, where a few years earlier the suspects of the Lockerbie bombing had been held before and during their trial, between 1999 and 2001. Later, Wilders moved to a heavily protected, secret apartment in or near The Hague. From November 2004 until today, he has been under the highest level of protection, which means he is permanently guarded by armed members of the Royal and Diplomatic Corps Protection Department (DKDB). A night out at a restaurant or the cinema with his wife, a walk in the park, shopping at the supermarket, going for a spin in his beloved Audi TT or a meeting with kindred souls are all pastimes he has not been able to take for granted since 2004.

The impact of such a sudden change of lifestyle is hard to imagine; we will return to the subject later in the book. One thing is certain, however: the events of autumn 2004 have only heightened Wilders' combativeness and missionary zeal. Van Gogh's murder had again proved that far from being a panic monger, Wilders had on the contrary accurately assessed the dangers. The fact that his

life had been made more difficult was no reason for him to end his crusade against the Islamic threat. 'It helps that I have always been a loner. I was never a regular at social gatherings like VVD get-togethers – a waste of time, I prefer working', he tried to play down the situation.⁴⁶

The Wilders Group existed for 18 months, until it changed its name to Party for Freedom (PVV) on 22 February 2006, to prove it was not a personality cult around Wilders. It was still far from being a properly organised party, however; the Wilders Group and the PVV consisted *de facto* of just three people: Geert Wilders, Martin Bosma and Bart Jan Spruyt. The latter two played an important role in the history of the PVV and merit a brief introduction.

Bart Jan Spruyt was managing director of the Edmund Burke Foundation, a think tank established in the year 2000 with the aim of spreading conservatism in the Netherlands. A member of the orthodox Restored Reformed Church with a PhD in history, Spruyt came from a very different background than Wilders. He was dissatisfied with the lack of influence and ambition of the small Christian parties and had familiarised himself with conservatism, an ideology that, in his view, recognised 'the crucial value of tradition and decency' without automatically being linked with the Christian faith. The September 11 attacks and Fortuyn's popularity convinced Spruyt that now more than ever, the Dutch political landscape was in urgent need of drastic reform. 'I believed we should stop standing on the sidelines. It had become abundantly clear that the existing parties had no answers to the large problems the Netherlands would face in the future. Conservatism did have the answers', Spruyt says.⁴⁷ He envisaged the Edmund Burke Foundation playing a pivotal role in leading the way to the establishment of a conservative people's party that would absorb parts of the CDA, VVD and LPF, and the small Christian parties. His goal was one large party, comparable to the US Republican party, which would accommodate different kinds of conservatives – neoconservatives, evangelicals, libertarians and more classic conservatives. In September 2004, after being rejected by the existing parties, Spruyt finally turned to Wilders, who had, after all, also voiced his intention to found a conservative party.

In the same month, the 40-year-old journalist Martin Bosma also offered his services. Bosma would eventually become – and remain – Wilders' most important ally. In his 2010 autobiography, Bosma is vague about his reasons for giving up his career as a journalist in favour of an uncertain future alongside a dissenting Member of Parliament. Money certainly was not one of them, as a monthly allowance of 300 euros was all the party could afford at first. Was it idealism? In any case, Bosma and Wilders had a lot in common. Like Wilders, Bosma felt a strong connection with Israel and hated left-wing politics with a passion. Bosma's strong aversion to the left is somewhat understandable, given that he studied political science at the University of Amsterdam at a time when the university was dominated by far-left students. These were the latter years of a tumultuous period of rioting squatters, extra-parliamentary protests against nuclear weapons and manifestos against the 'rising racism and fascism'. Left-wing rebellion had been the norm in Amsterdam for years – anyone with

differing opinions was better off elsewhere. So Bosma left for New York in 1990, to study at the famous New School for Social Research, and to work as a journalist. He became fascinated by the way political campaigns were run in America – the strong focus on the leader's personality, use of powerful one-liners and sometimes merciless discrediting of opponents. In his autobiography, he writes that in those years, he 'devoured everything he could lay his hands on by authors like Bob Shrum, Karl Rove and Lee Atwater' and was 'very familiar with the history of American speechwriting, in particular the work of Peggy Noonan, Pat Buchanan and Peter Robinson'. He also became fascinated by neo-conservative thinkers like Leo Strauss, Norman Podhoretz, Allan Bloom and Irving Kristoll, and retrospectively admired Ronald Reagan, who was generally reviled in the Netherlands. Back in the Netherlands, Bosma entered the Amsterdam journalism scene, helped to found a multicultural radio station and for a long time steered clear of politics. As a vegetarian, member of a car-sharing scheme, hands-on father and inhabitant of the libertarian city of Amsterdam, he did not exactly fit the description of someone aspiring to convert people to conservatism. He did enjoy rubbing people up the wrong way with his deadpan, archaically phrased remarks, though that fits into an Amsterdam tradition of provocative irony which had also been Van Gogh's trademark. His feeling for language, quirky sense of humour and knowledge of American campaign techniques made him an exceedingly useful ally for Wilders and Spruyt.⁴⁸

For the time being, however, Spruyt was still the movement's leading ideologist. In January 2005, Spruyt took Wilders on a three-week educational trip to the United States. Besides fundraising in Spruyt's American network, the aim of the trip was to deepen Wilders' knowledge of conservatism – sorely needed in Spruyt's opinion, as Wilders knew little about conservatism as a political philosophy. Says Spruyt,

Wilders gains his knowledge from reading reports; he is a practical political man, not an intellectual who occasionally delves into political philosophy. The conservative canon, including authors like Thomas Hobbes, Edmund Burke and Leo Strauss, was virtually unknown to him.

The trip to the US was meant to reduce this intellectual deficit. In New York and Philadelphia, Wilders and Spruyt visited the editors of the renowned *Commentary* magazine, as well as think tanks such as the Heritage Foundation, Foreign Policy Research Institute and the American Enterprise Institute. In Washington, they spoke with Republican politicians including Richard Perle – a former adviser to Ronald Reagan – and Grover Norquist, chairman of an anti-tax lobby and author of *Leave Us Alone. Getting the Government's Hands Off Our Money, Our Guns, Our Lives*. 'In the Netherlands, we don't have a party dedicated to lowering taxes. That opens up possibilities', Wilders thought out loud in the presence of a Dutch journalist.⁴⁹

What impressed Wilders most, however, was his visit to the Investigative Project on Terrorism, a heavily guarded Institute in Washington. The Institute's

founder was Steve Emerson, an investigative journalist known in the United States for his documentary, *Jihad in America*. To some, it made him an important authority in the field of Islamic terrorism, to others he was above all a charlatan who lined his pockets by spreading fear. ‘The Institute had an enormous intelligence archive at its disposal on radical Islamic factions world-wide’, says Spruyt. ‘Their message to us was that the Netherlands was still gravely underestimating the threat and could be subjected to an attack at any moment. It made a huge impression on Wilders.’⁵⁰

Shortly after returning from the United States, the Wilders Group published its first political manifesto, ‘*Onafhankelijkheidsverklaring*’ (Declaration of Independence), largely written by Spruyt. The title of the manifesto was meant as a clear signal that Wilders would distance himself from the Dutch political elite from now on. He had declared his ‘independence’ and, with great dramatic flair, called on the rest of the Dutch population to do the same. He viewed the Dutch elite as an all but homogeneous caste of ‘scared, cowardly people’ who scratched each other’s backs and did everything in their power to evade problems. In contrast, Wilders presented himself as someone with the courage to tell the truth. In his simultaneously published autobiography, *Choose Freedom*, Wilders provides an extensive insight into his new life in hiding and under constant supervision, complete with photos of his plainly furnished and heavily guarded safe address at Camp Zeist. These photographs, as well as the texts, lend both publications a strong sense of impending crisis, a feeling that the world has reached a critical juncture and that choosing the wrong direction could be fatal. The country had to be made defensible to face a world full of conflict and danger. The wording of many of the proposals in the *Declaration of Independence* was quite rigorous and blunt by Dutch standards. Where security was concerned, Wilders called for a ‘series of concrete measures’ such as introducing a minimum penalty and reform camps, putting five detainees in one cell, preventive frisking and, if necessary, deploying the army to maintain law and order. Islamic radicals threatening Dutch security should be deported without pardon, as should ‘street terrorists’ with dual nationality. The borders should be shut to non-Western immigrants for five years, and wearing headscarves banned in the public sector. The Wilders Group’s socio-economic agenda had an American ring to it: drastic tax reductions, a smaller government, fewer rules, less power to the unions and cuts in social security were the name of the game. They argued that the welfare state had made many citizens lazy, dependent and inert, and that the stringent dismissal laws, the minimum wage, the progressive tax system, and endless consultations between social partners put the economy at risk of stagnation.⁵¹

The phrasing may have been more radical, but the ideas were unmistakably the same as Wilders had put forward in his latter years in the VVD. The only new part was a focus on education, care for the elderly and political reform. Perfectly in line with conservative thinking, education was attributed an important role in character forming. Every self-aware citizen should possess an in-depth knowledge of their country’s history and national culture, which would strengthen their sense of national pride. ‘Students who create disturbance and are

in need of a firm hand' were to attend re-established reform schools. This disciplining of young and working people was offset by generous care for those Wilders called the 'genuinely vulnerable' – the elderly, who had literally 'earned' the country's support – in contrast to the 'pseudo-vulnerable', those 'made' vulnerable by the paternalism of the welfare state.

His suggestions for political reform were clearly Spruyt's contribution. Before leaving the VVD, Wilders had been an avowed opponent of political reform. In his ten-step plan of June 2004, he declared roundly that 'there's no point in changing the electoral system, what we need are courageous and decisive politicians'. Now, however, Wilders was arguing for a new electoral system in which 'the electorate has a closer relationship with their representative, and those elected are answerable to their voters'. As a way of narrowing the gap between citizens and politicians, the Wilders Group called for binding referenda on important issues as well as directly elected mayors and, in large cities, police chiefs. Another remarkable point of view, given that in his VVD years, Wilders was against a referendum, on principle. As a liberal Member of Parliament he voted against the planned referendum about the 'Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe'.

Fortunately for him, a majority in the House of Representatives disagreed, and the referendum on 1 June 2005 presented a good opportunity for Wilders to take the spotlight again. He managed to make logical connections between three of his arguments: his opposition against Turkey entering the European Union; the struggle to preserve a national identity; and the fight against a political elite in The Hague that was out of touch with the people. Or, as he stated in *Trouw*, 'If the Brussels clique get their way and make Islamic Turkey a member of the Union, I fear the worst for such vital issues as immigration.'⁵² His campaign earned a lot of publicity because he was one of the few people openly opposing the constitution, but also because it was the first time the general public became aware of the stringent security measures he was subjected to. It revealed a paradox that would haunt Wilders for the rest of his career. On the one hand, the security measures made it difficult for him to campaign on the street, handing out pamphlets and speaking in public. On the other hand it generated a huge amount of extra publicity, which went a long way towards compensating for his confined circumstances. In short, the setback also turned out to be a huge advantage.

The electoral breakthrough 2006

By opposing the treaty Wilders once again proved the acuteness of his political instinct. No less than 61.6% of the turnout (which was small) voted against the treaty. The established parties who had all supported the treaty had again failed to convince a large proportion of their voters. Three years after the Fortuyn elections, there still seemed to be room for something different. In the months following the referendum, however, it became increasingly clear to Wilders that Spruyt's neoconservative programme was not the best way of getting the voters

behind him. In early 2006, Spruyt had written an extensive ideological manifesto called *A New-Realistic Vision*, in which he refers to the work of numerous philosophers like Alexis de Tocqueville, Peter Sloterdijk and Leo Strauss to emphasise the importance of citizenship and such traditional institutions as the family, the church, the neighbourhood association and the school. He wanted to call a halt to the spreading spirit of slackness, lawlessness and cultural and moral decline by launching a conservative civilising offensive through reform of the education system and an increased focus on family and upbringing. However, the manifesto was hardly noticed by the press, just as Wilders generally attracted less and less media attention in 2006. The lack of media interest went hand in hand with a steep decline in the polls from February 2006 onwards. By the summer of 2006, the PVV barely won 1% of the vote in some polls. Publications like *A New-Realistic Vision* were probably too academic to appeal to a wider public, and unlike Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Wilders never managed to gain the support of the small group of neoconservative intellectuals in the Netherlands, either. On top of that, American neoconservatism could hardly be held up as an inspiring example anymore – in the summer of 2006 it was becoming evident that the democratisation of Iraq and Afghanistan propagated by the neoconservatives was turning into a disaster. In the US and the world over, George W. Bush's popularity had plummeted to an all-time low. Who would want to be associated with that?

In anticipation of the early elections about to be held in November 2006, Wilders decided to change tack that summer. 'He wanted to focus on immigration and Islam, completely ignoring such conservative issues as education and the importance of a cultural foundation for society. Those things didn't really interest him', says Spruyt. According to him, Wilders increasingly allowed electoral considerations to determine his point of view. For instance, he suddenly argued for a blanket ban on Polish workers in the labour market, even though this contradicted the neoconservative belief in a free market and removing obstacles for trade and industry. 'Brandishing *De Telegraaf*, which predicted a tidal wave of Polish workers, Wilders and Bosma pointed to opinion polls – if the voters they were hoping to reach were against this, then so were they', says Spruyt, who handed in his resignation in August 2006.

The shift in content that Spruyt flags up also emerges in the 2006 electoral programme, and in interviews Wilders gave in the summer and autumn of the same year. The somewhat reflective, elitist conservatism had given way to a much simpler rhetoric on the dangers of immigration and Islam. This also called for a different kind of candidate. Wilders replaced the candidates put forward by Spruyt – mainly conservatives with a Christian background – with individuals outside the political world, such as the Amsterdam police inspector Hero Brinkman, the Rotterdam real estate agent Barry Madlener and a television producer from Limburg, Dion Graus. Wilders needed publicity – lots of publicity, as there was no budget for a large-scale campaign – and he knew he would not get it by publishing conservative newspaper essays. His savage one-liners, evocative doom scenarios and vicious personal attacks on his opponents were more successful. In an interview with *De Volkskrant*, for instance, he warned that the

country was in danger of being flooded by a ‘tsunami of Islamisation’. ‘If we do nothing to prevent it, the other points of my programme will be redundant’, he said ominously, arguing that the high crime rate among Moroccans could not be treated as a separate issue from Islam. ‘Their behaviour arises from their culture and religion’, Wilders said; he no longer believed in the existence of a moderate, liberal Islam. During the campaign, he made no mention of the necessity of a moral bond, changes and improvements to the education system or a more decent society – the conservative educator of the people had made way for an anti-Islamic crusader.

The new direction soon bore fruit. Though the PVV had slowly started creeping up the polls, the result of the House of Representatives election in November 2006 exceeded all expectations. According to Geert Tomlow, in twelfth place on the list of candidates, even the most optimistic of party members had not counted on more than six seats, or 3% of the vote. ‘Martin Bosma and Dion Graus were in fifth and sixth place, and Bosma especially felt uneasy about it. Madlener, Van Dijck and Fritsma, numbers seven, eight and nine, didn’t even get their hopes up.’ Not an overly pessimistic reaction, given that the polls predicted the PVV would get four or five seats. But the PVV won 579,490 votes, 5.9% of the vote, which gained the party nine seats in the House of Representatives.

Though the result did not come close to Pim Fortuyn’s posthumous victory in 2002, it was certainly an encouraging debut. In one blow, the PVV had become the country’s fifth largest party, larger than D66 and GreenLeft. What was more, none of the other small parties that had emerged from the LPF passed the electoral threshold, allowing Wilders to appoint himself as Fortuyn’s definitive political successor – and there were various signs that the PVV was still far from having peaked. First, the PVV did remarkably well at mock elections held at secondary schools immediately before the House of Representatives election; of the roughly 150,000 participating, 12% voted for Wilders’ party. A second sign was the huge number of preference votes won by Rita Verdonk, the second candidate on the VVD’s list. With 620,555 votes, she single-handedly trumped not just the PVV, but also the VVD’s leading candidate, Mark Rutte. The staggering number of preference votes could largely be seen as an expression of support for the firm stance Verdonk had taken in her role as Minister for Integration and Immigration, and to the horror of many VVD members, it was reason enough for Verdonk to claim leadership of the party. Though the attempt failed, it was yet more proof that the liberals had still not recovered from the blow Fortuyn had dealt them. To Wilders, Verdonk’s popularity was above all a sign that immigration and integration were issues that would be able to win the PVV many more seats in the future.

And so the year 2006, which had started off so badly for Wilders, ended on a high note after all. With nine seats in parliament, the PVV had made its parliamentary breakthrough and would now be able to think seriously about building an organisation and devising a strategy. Without Bart Jan Spruyt acting as the party’s conservative conscience, the PVV also set a new ideological course. In the next chapter I will discuss this new ideological direction in more detail.

Notes

- 1 H. Knippenberg, 'The Incorporation of Limburg in the Dutch State', in *Nationalising and Denationalising European Border Regions, 1800–2000. Views from Geography and History*, J.D. Markusse and H. Knippenberg, eds, 153–172. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1999.
- 2 H. Bakvis, *Catholic Power in the Netherlands*, Kingston, Ontario: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1981.
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